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Macrina and Melania the Elder: *Painting* the Portraits of Holy Learned Women in the Fourth-Century Roman Empire

Andra Jugănaru

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

Macrina the Younger and Melania the Elder, two outstanding monastic leaders of the fourth century, are presented in the sources not only as exemplary saints, but also as learned women. They received both a secular and a theological instruction. They were perceived both as ascetic leaders and as spiritual teachers. The male authors who wrote about them stress their involvement in controversies over theological trends and ascetic life-styles not only in order to give additional proofs for their holiness, but also in order to use these saintly figures as mouthpieces of their own positions.

Keywords: Macrina the Elder; Gregory of Nyssa; Basil of Caesarea; Melania the Elder; Rufinus; Origen; *apokatastasis*.

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Andra Jugănaru
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

I dedicate this chapter to †Professor Marianne Sághy, who supervised my MA and my PhD theses in the past six years with ceaseless support, heartiness, enthusiasm, patience, care, and generosity, to whom I owe my scholarly orientation and formation, who taught me both Late Antiquity and humanity. This modest tribute is a humble expression of my everlasting gratitude. May her memory be eternal! (21.09.2018)

Introduction

Among the models of sanctity which the fourth-century patristic writings propose, the aristocratic woman renouncing her wealth and marriage for the sake of asceticism is widely spread in both Eastern and Western Christianity. The Church Fathers do not praise these holy women only for their piety, but also for their intellectual achievements. Interestingly, virgins' and widows' learning is not confined to the households, but is also active in holy places and on pilgrimages. The "pious household" is the *didaskaleion*, where women become "vessels" of learning, receiving both Christian spiritual and Classical secular formation. Travel, however, is also formative, enriching the pilgrims' mind.

In this essay, I examine the representations of two outstanding fourth-century monastic leaders with influences in both Eastern and Western Christianity. Both of them are unique examples of conversion to monasticism and catalyzers of pious men and women who became ascetics. Their leadership did not resume to the organization of daily life in an ascetic setting, but the two saints are also praised for their

wisdom, which synthesized the secular and the Christian learning, having become teachers of the true philosophy, understood as monastic life.

Macrina the Younger (c. 327 - 379) was the first-born of an aristocratic family with a long Christian tradition. Her parents, Emmelia and Basil the Elder, were devoted Christians, having ancestors among the disciples of Gregory Thaumaturgus, through whom they inherited the legacy of Origen. Their elders also included martyrs and confessors of the last wave of anti-Christian persecutions under Maximinus Daia (c. 306 - 313). Besides her parents and herself, the synaxaries record four of her other siblings.

A member of gens Antonia, Melania the Elder (c. 350 – c. 410) was born in Spain to one of the wealthiest families of the Roman Empire. She married the praetorian prefect Valerius Maximus, had three sons, of whom only Publicola survived, and was widowed at 22. After the death of her husband, she made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives. According to the sources, she later on influenced her son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter, Melania the Younger, to take the monastic path.

Macrina and Melania received much attention from the Church Fathers, not only in hagiographies, but also in other types of writings. The sources referring to them emphasize not only their holiness, but also their learning. While nothing survives from the pen of Macrina and Melania, the male authors of these sources stress both their Classical and Christian culture. What is the relation between the profane and the sacred in the education of these monastic women? To what extent did their learning contribute to their involvement in the theological debates of the day, and, ultimately, to their sanctity?

Macrina, the "Teacher of Philosophy"

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-394) was one of the three Cappadocian Fathers and the third son of Emmelia's and Basil the Elder's ten children. His elder sister, Macrina was the one who, according to her brother, led half of the family towards asceticism. *Vita Macrinae* is the first hagiographichal text dedicated to a woman, with the clear intention of presenting Christian readers with an exemplary life. According to the *Life*, Macrina's parents, members of the high aristocracy of Cappadocia and Christians with a long family tradition, took care of her education.

Her mother, Emmelia, established Macrina's "curriculum," which included "the parts of the God-inspired scriptures that seem more easily learned at a young age…especially the Wisdom of Solomon, and … whatever bears on the moral life."[1] Macrina's early instruction was gradual, suitable to her age, with the purpose of revealing to her the best examples for living a Christian life. Later on, Gregory develops this argument, adding that little Macrina knew the Psalter by heart, since she used to recite each of its parts daily, at the proper time.[2] What did Gregory want to convey with this detail? Did he simply seek to present a factual truth, or did he have a broader agenda, setting the basis of a norm for ascetic women? This detail might actually refer to Macrina's later achievement, since the routine chanting of the Psalms several times a day corresponds to a more developed ascetic discipline, which, most probably, occurred several years later, when Macrina and her mother transformed their household into an ascetic establishment.[3]

The *Vita* stresses that the Scripture-based education was chosen on purpose by Macrina's parents, instead of the traditional Classical curriculum available to pupils at that time. More precisely, Macrina did not receive "the customary secular curriculum, which for the most part instructs the early years of study by means of the poems," since Emmelia

> thought it disgraceful and altogether unsuitable to teach a tender and impressionable nature either the tragic passions – those passions of women … or the indecencies of comedy, or the causes of the miseries that befell Troy, which through their degrading tales concerning women tend to the corruption of character.[4]

One might conclude that Macrina received, mostly from her mother, a specifically Christian education, which excluded at least part of the Classical curriculum in favour of an exclusive spiritual

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[1] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Saint Macrina* (henceforth *VSM*), 4,3, trans. Anna M. Silvas, in *Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God*, ed. eadem (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).
[2] *VSM*, 4:3-4.
[3] In 358, shortly after the beginning of his own retreat in the already "monasticized household" of Annisa, Basil the Great wrote a letter about this system of prayers. Anna Silvas suggests his model was Macrina's prayer routine. See *Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God,* 113-114, note 24.
[4] *VSM*, 4,2: 113.

instruction, based mostly on the Scriptures. I would not question the authenticity of this detail, even if Gregory had a specific purpose for conveying it. I would argue that the Psalter as 'didactic material' for learning the alphabet, might have been an alternative "school" for Macrina.

However, was Macrina completely cut off from Classical texts? Some scholars deny that Macrina was familiar with Classical authors. Yet a closer look at Gregory's writings and an inquiry into the family's background demonstrate Macrina's broader paideia. Her father, Basil the Elder, was a famous rhetorician and their home library in Neocaesarea very likely included not only the writings of Plato, but also the 'modern' works of Origen of Alexandria. Origen was valued as part of the family's background, since Macrina's grand-mother, the Elder Macrina, had connections with Gregory Thaumaturgus, perceived as one of Origen's disciples.[5] Macrina has likely accessed other philosophical works, such as Methodius' *Symposium*. Her *Vita* describes her intellectual inquiry, maturity, and acquisition of self-control.

Sources provide further suggestions for Macrina's theological instruction. Ascetic women in correspondence with the Cappadocian Fathers used to engage in deep theological and doctrinal arguments. Macrina was the superior of the family monastery in Annisa and from this position she is often called a "teacher" (*didaskale*), not only by the nuns (including her mother) or by pious women who visited the place, but also by her well-known and respected siblings, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. Her teaching was fundamental for the community exposed to heterodox theologies and enthusiastic forms of asceticism, such as the theories of Eusthatius of Sebasteia and the ascetics who followed him.[6]

Gregory completes the image of Macrina's education in the dialog *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, written a few years after the *Vita*. Gregory starts a profound discussion with Macrina, on her deathbed. It is unlikely that in reality this long philosophical inquiry took place at

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[5] See *Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God*, 164-165, where Anna Silvas discusses Elizabeth Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn'," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6(3) (1998): 423-428.
Basil of Caesarea, Letter 204, 6, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (London: William Heinemann, 1934). Basil of Caesarea, Letter 210, 1. Basil of Caesarea, Letter 223, 3.

[6] *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*: 167.

that moment, given Macrina's health condition. A discussion on the afterlife between Gregory and Macrina, however, is likely to have occurred not only during her last hours, but also previously. As such, Gregory might simply have structured these discussions later.[7]

The desire to discover the "real Macrina" represents a challenge, because it is difficult to distinguish in the dialog *On the Soul and the Resurrection* Macrina's real philosophical and theological background on the doctrinal controversies of the time from Gregory's own positions. However, does this problem not lend weight to her "authenticity," or better, to her real implication as a *didaskale*? Macrina is, of course, "Gregory's Macrina;" Gregory shapes her image through the filter of recollection as well as with a propagandistic aim. I argue that this image is nevertheless based on the "real Macrina." Macrina's words in this dialog are more than just a literary tool which Gregory used in order to give weight to his own convictions.

Macrina constantly refers to Classical philosophy. She mentions the teachings of "the wise," who regarded the human being as "a kind of microcosm comprising in himself the same elements which go to make up the universe."[8] She justifies the resurrection of the body, since the soul, although unbounded, always maintains a connection with some stable elements of the original body and, on the divine command, is able to recognize and re-gather them.[9] She alludes to Plato's *Phaedrus* and to Aristotle's *On the Soul*, and she claims that their theories should be abandoned.[10]

Origen is perhaps the most alluded to author. Macrina could have become acquainted with his theories either directly, through the well-known treatise *On the First Principles*, through the *Philocalia* composed by Basil and Gregory Nazianzus during their sojourn in Annisa, or through her grand-mother, the Elder Macrina.

Macrina firmly rejects some of Origen's ideas, such as the pre-existence of the soul.[11] In addition, she (or, rather Gregory speaking

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[7] *Ibidem*, 160.

[8] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* 1, 30, trans. Anna M. Silvas, in *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, 177.

[9] *Ibidem,* 5, 11: 201.

[10] *Ibidem,* 3, 9-10: 189-190; 37: 193; 47: 195. Tertullian also wrote several works on the soul, but, according to Anna Silvas, it is unlikely that Gregory was familiar with any of them. I also suggest that Macrina could not have accessed them.

[11] *Ibidem*, 8, 19; 9, 19.

through her) accepts that evil has no ontological existence, being just a state characterized by the absence of good.[12] But Macrina (or Gregory) carefully rectifies the *apokatastasis* of Origen. According to Gregory's record, the *apokatastasis* will take place in two stages. The first one is the universal resurrection, possible due to the uninterrupted connection between the soul and the body. The second one culminates with the universal restauration. After having gone through a process of purification proportional with their sins, all beings will be restored in Christ, evil will no longer exist, since "God will be all in all," (1 Cor 15:28) and, therefore, no punishment or purification will be needed for the sinful. Moreover, even the devil will be saved.[13] These observations reveal that "Macrina's" *apokatastasis* is significantly different from the Origenian one. Origen's doctrine of *apokatastasis* is based on the pre-existence and eternity of the souls, which "Macrina" does not support. In his treatise, *On the Principles,* Origen also mentions both a corporeal and a non-corporeal *apokatastasis*. He does not state that the devil would be saved, but he argues instead that any will which is against God would be converted because of God's mercy.[14]

As Gregory describes it, Macrina's attitude facing death shows an assimilation of the *Phaedo*. While Gregory is deeply affected by the recent death of his brother, Basil of Caesarea, and fears his elder sister's imminent death, Macrina is not frightened by death: "Macrina fell naturally into the role of a Christian Socrates…discussing with her brother disciple why she was not afraid of death, and arguing for the continuation of the soul."[15]

Melania the Elder, "Origen's reader"

The only source on Macrina is Gregory of Nyssa who testifies about her upbringing and education. By contrast, sources on Melania the Elder are more abundant and, at the same time, more difficult to decipher. She is the hero of Palladius, Paulinus of Nola, Jerome, and Rufinus, who present her both in positive and negative light. In

[12] *Ibidem,* 2, 33; 6, 25.
[13] *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God,* 158. *Ibidem,* 4, 17; 6,25; 7, 11, 18.
[14] Henri Crouzel, *Origen Personajul, exegetul, omul duhovnicesc, teologul* [Origen: The Character, the Exegete, the Spiritual Man, the Theologian], trans. Cristian Pop (Bucharest: Deisis, 2014), 418-430.
[15] *Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God,* 159.

addition, several letters of Evagrius Ponticus are addressed to her or her community of monks and nuns on the Mount of Olives.

Melania was a member of the high aristocracy in Rome. After the death of her husband and two of her three children, she travelled to Egypt, where she spent time in the company of monks persecuted by Arians. She went to Jerusalem from there, where she founded a so-called "double monastery" with Rufinus.

On her trip to Egypt, to Alexandria and Nitria, Melania accompanied several well-known ascetics: "Pambo, Arsisius, Sarapion the Great, Paphnutius of Scete, Isidore the Confessor, bishop of Hermopolis, and Dioscorus."[16] She supported a certain faction of the Arian controversy, which included several well-known monks, "Isidore, Pisimius, Adelphius, Paphnutius and Pambo, with them also Ammonius Parotes, and twelve bishops and priests."[17] Pambo was no other than the teacher of the Tall Brothers, the four monks and priests later accused of their "Arian" views. According to the sources, this triggered her imprisonment, during Valens' persecution, but, as Palladius suggests, her social status made the judge release her. I argue that this episode shows not only her great authority and influence,[18] but, in addition, it can be a testimony of the teachings that she received during the half a year she spent travelling to and in the desert.

From Egypt, Melania, travelled to Palestine and founded the monastery on the Mount of Olives, where she spent twenty-seven years.[19] This period proved to be of outmost importance for Melania's intellectual and spiritual accomplishment.

Evagrius Ponticus, taught by the Tall Brothers and Ammonius, kept a long-lasting correspondence with Melania and her community.[20] In some letters, Evagrius referred to *apatheia*, to the "pure prayer," and to the dangers of *logismoi* and *eidola*.[21] In the famous *Letter to Melania*, he develops his theories in detail. Scholars debate whether it was addressed

[16] Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, 46, 2, trans. Robert T. Maier (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1965).
[17] *Ibidem*, 46, 3.
[18] Nicole Moine, "Melaniana," in *Recherches Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 15 (1980): 6.
[19] *Ibidem*, 7.
[20] *Ibidem*, 31-32.
[21] Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 190.

to Melania or to Rufinus,[22] but as letters were public in Late Antiquity, I agree with the idea that it was possibly well-known to the entire community of the Mount of Olives, regardless of its addressee.[23] Evagrius explains the "image of God" (Genesis 1:26). He states that human beings are "signs" of the Son and the Holy Spirit, that both body and soul will be *nous*, thus fulfilling the words of John 17:22: "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them; that they may be one, even as We are One."

At the time of the original sin, the soul lost the "image of God" and willed to take "the image of animals." Thus, it acquired the animals' movement of the body, and also received negative aspects, such as pride, vainglory, and avarice. The only one who preserved God's image is the Son incarnate, whose nature is a "naked *nous*." "After the worlds end," God will make humans fit "the resemblance of the image of His Son" (Rom 8:29).[24]

Not surprisingly, the idea of *apokatastasis* is present as well. Both body and soul will be raised to the intellect, but the three hypostases of the Trinity will remain and absorb the three components of the rational creatures. The Persons of the Trinity have the same will and the intellectual beings will have the same will, which will be oriented towards God.[25]

Evagrius remained in correspondence with not only Melania and Rufinus, but also with members of their community, like Severa, a nun to whom he sent a copy of his *To the Virgin*,[26] which could have been intended to serve Melania's community as a rule for nuns.[27] Other treatises in Melania's monastery were Evagrius' trilogy (*Praktikos,*

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[22] *Ibidem*, 72-73. Augustine Cassiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*: *Beyond Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[23] Moreover, the fact that Evagrius "does not express himself completely freely" in this letter might be caused by the fact that "other people, apart from the addressee, might read." See Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis. A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 471.

[24] Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 73-75.

[25] The association of God with the Good Farmer, Who will transform even the most damaged seeds into fruitful ones, resembles the allusion used by Gregory of Nyssa in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. The comparison of these two fragments is, however, beyond the purpose of this essay. Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 474-477.

[26] Cassiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 43.

[27] Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 22.

Gnostikos, Kephalaia Gnostika), the *Antirrhetikos*, and *To the Monks*.[28] Whether or not *To the Virgin* and *To the Monk* became "monastic rules," they are in agreement with the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers. Moreover, scholars agreed that they reveal an anti-Gnostic position, probably risen from an ascetic milieu.[29] Evagrius' readers, Melania and Rufinus, must have been familiar with the polemics concerning material creation, the nature of angels and demons, the body of Christ, or the nature of human body after the resurrection.

Palladius notes that, while she stayed in Jerusalem,

> Being very learned and loving literature she turned night into day by perusing every writing of the ancient commentators, including 3,000,000 (lines) of Origen and 2,500,000 (lines) of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius, Basil, and other standard writers. Nor did she read them once only and casually, but she laboriously went through each book seven or eight times. Wherefore also she was enabled to be freed from knowledge falsely so called and to fly on wings, thanks to the grace of these books; elevated by kindly hopes she made herself a spiritual bird and journeyed to Christ.[30]

In spite of Palladius's brevity on these books and acknowledging that the numbers might be exaggerated, is it possible to identify Melania's readings? In addition, how did they influence her involvement in the theological controversies? What is the "false knowledge" that Melania was "freed from"?

Origen's writings were the core of Melania's readings. All other writers mentioned in Palladius' account are Origen's exegetes: Gregory is most probably Gregory of Nazianzen; Pierius is, probably, the Alexandrian catechist whom Jerome and Photius call "Origen the Younger" or "the new Origen;" he was one of the diligent followers of Origen, directed the Didaskaleion in Alexandria in the 280s (during Bishop Theonas and Emperors Carus and Diocletian), and supported

[28] These works reached Constantinople, where they were freely quoted by Socrates Scholasticus, whose source must have been the Mount of Olives. See Augustine Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 44.

[29] *Evagrius of Pontus. The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, ed. and trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 121-122.

[30] Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 55, 3.

the doctrine of *apokatastasis*.[31] Basil is Basil of Caesarea; Stephen is unknown, but I suggest that he might be the Lydian monk mentioned in the twenty-fourth chapter of the *Lausiac History*.[32] All in all, Palladius includes Melania among the supporters of the 'Origenist party' in the context of the Origenist controversy, with a much closer reading to Origen, unlike Macrina's "revisionism."

Which writings of Gregory of Nazianzen and Basil the Great could have Melania read? The two Cappadocians compiled a *Philocalia* of Origen's writings, a manuscript which, I argue, might have reached the monastery on the Mount of Olives. The monastery on the Mount of Olives headed by Melania and Rufinus had long connections with Basil of Caesarea, as his letters demonstrate. In addition, one manuscript of his *Small Asketikon*, the earlier collection of questions and answers about ascetic life, arrived in its Greek version to the monastery.[33] Since Melania's community was organized according to the principles of Basil, I suggest that the *Asketikon* was a source for the monastic organization on the Mount of Olives. A possible interaction of Gregory of Nyssa with Melania's community in 382 might have resulted in Melania's access to the dialog *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.[34]

Palladius also reveals Melania's intuitions about the dangers of the barbarian invasions in Rome, at the beginning of the fifth century. She convinces her family to leave Rome, abandon their wealth, and embrace monasticism, quoting, apparently, the verse from 1 John 2:18: "Little children, it was written 400 years ago, It is the last hour. Why do you love to linger in life's vanities? Perchance the days of antichrist will surprise you, and you will cease to enjoy your wealth and your ancestral property."[35] Apart from biblical references, Melania also alludes to the Sibylline Oracles.[36]

Melania's acquaintances reveal her education and involvement in the theological quarrels. Melania instructed Olympias, deaconess in Constantinople and supporter of John Chrysostom: "most venerable

[31] Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 224-226.
[32] Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus,* 21, note 31.
[33] Anna M. Silvas, *The Rule of St. Basil in Latin and English. A Revised Critical Edition* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), 9-10.
[34] Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 463.
[35] Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 44, 5.
[36] Moine, "Melaniana," 47-48.

and devoted lady Olympias followed the counsel of Melania, attending to her precepts and walking in her footsteps."[37]

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Before concluding this essay, a final detail about Macrina and Melania should be mentioned. As ascetic women of the elite, both of them wrote letters. A fourteenth-century scribe who was commissioned with a collection of letters wrote in a marginal note of the manuscript he had copied that he had to choose between copying the letters written by Theano, one of Pythagoras' disciples, or the ones of Saint Macrina. He chose Theano, apparently because Macrina was better-known for her holiness than for her philosophy. Thus, the texts supposed to be Macrina's letters are lost.[38] Even if the copyist might have mistakenly referred either to Gregory's *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, or to his *Life of Macrina*, the possibility that Macrina was a letter-writer is supported by the range of disciples whom she had outside Annisa (as her *vita* suggests, the widow Ventiana from Constantinople used to frequently visit Annisa, and the community used to receive guests). Melania was also a letter-writer, as sources suggest. However, they were also condemned to oblivion and loss.[39]

Conclusions

Even in the absence of any direct evidence from Macrina and Melania, the surviving sources related to them testify for several details about their learning. First of all, both of them received both a secular and a religious instruction either due to the family's background, or to the connections with Church Fathers. Both had profound knowledge of the Scriptures, from which they used to recite daily, but which they accommodated with Classical readings.

Besides the Scriptures, Origen and his exegetes were well-known to them. Although both Macrina and Melania accepted the *apokatastasis* and other ideas of Origen, they assimilated his thought differently.

[37] Palladius, *Lausiac History*, 56.

[38] *Macrina the Younger: Philosopher of God*, 247-248.

[39] Robin Darling Young, "A Life in Letters," in Catherine M. Chin, Caroline T. Schroeder (ed.), *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family* (Oakland, Ca: University of California Press, 2017), 153-154.

While for Macrina (as Gregory of Nyssa depicts her), Origen's ideas were significantly, but carefully and respectfully revised, Melania adhered to his ideas more closely.

Both women were monastic founders and community leaders. From these positions, they instructed influential Church thinkers, such as the Cappadocians, Evagrius, or Rufinus. It is even possible that the two monastic centres had contacts, since Basil's *Small Asketikon* and perhaps *On the Soul and the Resurrection* were accessible on the Mount of Olives. They also took a certain side in theological and ascetical controversies (Macrina – by taking a distance from the enthusiast followers of Eusthatius of Sebasteia; Melania – in the Origenist controversy).

Finally, the Church thinkers represent them in their works not only with the purpose of providing their audiences with exemplary lives. Due to their knowledge, Macrina and Melania served as loudspeakers of the theological views of their writers.

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